

Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

Plan your trip (Chapter)

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welcome to Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei



Rainforests & Oceans

For many people this region is defined by its equatorial rainforest. Significant chunks of primary jungle – among the most ancient ecosystems on earth – remain intact, protected by national parks and conservation projects. Seemingly impenetrable foliage and muddy, snaking rivers conjure up the ‘heart of darkness’ – but join a ranger-led nature walk, for example, and you’ll learn about the mind-boggling biodiversity all around, from the pitcher plants, lianas and orchids of the humid lowlands, to the conifers and rhododendrons of high-altitude forests. The icing on this verdant cake is the chance to encounter wildlife in its natural habitat.

The most common sightings will be of a host of insects or colourful birdlife, but you could get lucky and spot a foraging tapir, a silvered leaf monkey or an orangutan swinging through the jungle canopy. The oceans are just as bountiful with the chance to snorkel or dive among shoals of tropical fish, paint-box dipped corals, turtles, sharks and dolphins.

Urban Adventures

If urban exploration is more your scene, you won’t be disappointed either. Singapore is the region’s overachiever, a showstopper of a city combining a historical legacy of elegant colonial buildings with stunning contemporary architecture and world-class



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Entwined by shared history, Southeast Asia's terrific trio offer steamy jungles packed with wildlife, beautiful beaches, idyllic islands, culinary sensations and multi-ethnic cultures.

(left) Sri Mariamman Temple (p484) in Singapore's Chinatown
(below) Turtles at Sipadan, Sabah, Malaysia (p359)



TIM ROCK/GETTY IMAGES ©

attractions such as its zoo, museums and amazing botanical gardens (two of them!). Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur (KL), is less organised but perhaps more appealing because of that – a place where Malay *kampung* (village) life stands cheek by jowl with the 21st-century glitz of the Petronas Towers, and shoppers shuttle from traditional wet markets to air-conditioned megamalls. The historical cores of Melaka and George Town (Penang) are on the Unesco World Heritage list for their unique architectural and cultural townscapes, developed over half a millennium of Southeast Asian cultural and trade exchange. Both should be high on your to-visit list, but if you're looking for somewhere more under-the-radar then try Brunei's surprisingly unostentatious

capital Bandar Seri Begawan: its picturesque water village, Kampung Ayer, is the largest stilt settlement in the world.

Cultural Riches

Mirroring the natural environment's diversity is the region's potpourri of cultures. Muslim Malays, religiously diverse Chinese, and Hindu and Muslim Indians muddle along with aboriginal groups (the Orang Asli) on Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo's indigenous people, scores of tribes known collectively as Dayaks. Each ethnic group has its own language and cultural practices, which you can best appreciate through a packed calendar of festivals and a delicious variety of cuisines.

20 TOP EXPERIENCES

Malaysian Street Food

1 White tablecloth? Confounding cutlery? Snooty waiters? A roof? No thanks. In Malaysia, the best food is served in the humblest surroundings and involves the least amount of fuss. The country's seemingly countless vendors (p35) serve delicious dishes from mobile carts, stalls and shophouses, many still employing recipes and techniques handed down from previous generations. And in addition to informality, ubiquity and quality, you're also spoilt for choice; on a single Malaysian street you're likely to encounter Malay, regional Chinese, southern Indian and Western cuisines. Central Market (p306), Kota Kinabalu



Diving, Sipadan

2 Sometimes it seems as if the world's most colourful marine life – from the commonplace to utterly alien fish, molluscs and reptiles, creatures that seem to have swum through every slice of the colour wheel – considers the seawall of Sipadan (p359) to be prime real estate. They live here, play here, hunt here and eat here, and you, lucky thing, may dance an underwater ballet with them. For any diver, from the amateur to seasoned veterans like Jacques Cousteau, Sipadan is the ultimate underwater adventure.

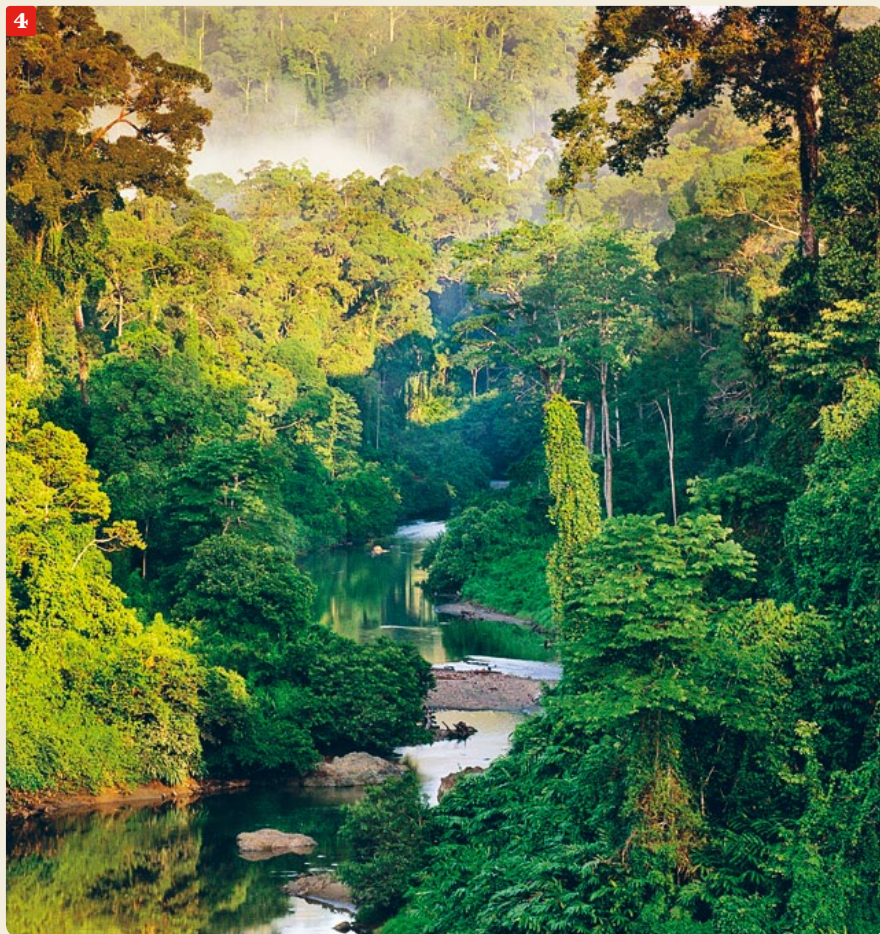


3



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4



KIMT IMAGE - FRANIS LANTING/GETTY IMAGES ©



Kampung Ayer (Water Village), Brunei

3 Borneo is modernising quickly, but even the most tech-savvy entrepreneur is only a generation removed from the *kampung ayer*, or water village. Some only grow up in these waterbound communities, yet many live out their days in them. That's the case in the water village (p456) that hugs Brunei's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, the largest of its kind in the world. Some residents live humbly, while others park sports cars before catching a water taxi home, a fascinating juxtaposition of nostalgia and development all set on stilts.

Jungle Treks, Danum Valley, Sabah

4 'Walk quickly', our guide tells us. 'Fire ants.' Once again we wonder: is this really fun? But it is. Trekking in the Danum Valley (p354) is one of the most stirring experiences in Borneo – walking through a forest that is older than humanity. And while this is no open African savannah, and spotting animals can be difficult in the brush, the wildlife we see is all the more amazing for that: iridescent flying lizards, curious frogs, emerald pit vipers and, peering out with its headlight eyes, an adorable slow loris.

Snorkelling, Pulau Perhentian, Terengganu

5 Though eastern Peninsular Malaysia has several islands offering unparalleled underwater activities, Pulau Perhentian (p283) wins when it comes to attracting snorkellers. Perhaps it's the water itself: clear and ethereally blue. Or the huge variety of marine life: sharks, tropical fish, turtles and nesting urchins. Living coral beds lie close to shore, and on most days you won't have to swim much further than the jetty at Long Beach before finding yourself inside a rainbow cloud of fish of all shapes and sizes.



George Town's Colonial District, Penang

6 Once abandoned by locals and seemingly forgotten by tourists, George Town (p151) has emerged as one of the region's hottest destinations in the last couple of years. The 2008 Unesco World Heritage declaration sparked a frenzy of cultural preservation, and the city's charismatic shophouses have been turned into house museums, boutique hotels and chic restaurants. Aggressive drivers aside, it's also one of the best cities in Southeast Asia to explore on foot. Pinang Peranakan Mansion (p155)

Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre, Sabah

7 There is no primate quite like the orang-utan. These great apes are a stirring combination: brawn and grace; raw power and gentle restraint; cuteness. And behind their sparkling eyes lie deep reserves of what we can only call wisdom and, sometimes, sadness. All these complicated observations occur at the Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (p343), where visitors can see the apes from an often crowded viewing platform, the highlight of many a Sabah trip.



Indulgence, Pulau Langkawi, Kedah

8 Pulau Langkawi (p183) ain't called the Jewel of Kedah for nothin', and its white-sand beaches, isolated resorts, acclaimed diving and pristine jungles live up to the metaphor. Cheap booze (Langkawi is duty-free) and a decent restaurant and bar scene provide just the hint of a party vibe, while a glut of kid-friendly activities make it a great destination for families. But it's not just a holiday island; off-the-beaten-track-type exploration will reveal that Pulau Langkawi has managed to retain its endearing *kampung* soul. Tanjung Rhu beach (p189)

ANDERS BLONOVIS/GETTY IMAGES ©

RICHARD JANSON/GETTY IMAGES ©



Kuching, Sarawak

9 Borneo's most sophisticated and stylish city, Kuching (p382) brings together an atmospheric old town, aromatic waterfront, fine cuisine and chic night-spots. But the city's biggest draw is what's nearby: some of Sarawak's finest natural sites, easy to visit on day trips. You can spot semiwild orang-utans or search out a giant Rafflesia flower in the morning, look for proboscis monkeys and wild crocs on a sundown cruise in the South China Sea, and then dine on superfresh seafood or crunchy midin fern tips. Sarawak State Assembly (p388)



Trekking, Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak

10 The air is clean and cool, the rice fields impossibly green, the local cuisine delicious and the trekking – from longhouse to longhouse – some of the best in Borneo, but the star attraction of the Kelabit Highlands (p444) is the people, justifiably famous for their ready smiles and easy way with visitors. Getting to Sarawak's remote northeastern corner is half the fun – you can either bust your butt on logging roads for 12 hours or take an exhilarating flight in a 19-seat Twin Otter turboprop. Indigenous Kelabit woman

Taman Negara, Pahang

11 To visit Taman Negara (p260) is to step back in time and experience the land as it was in primeval times. Inside this shadowy, high-impenetrable jungle, ancient trees with gargantuan buttressed root systems dwarf luminescent fungi, orchids, and flora rare and beautiful. Making their home within are elephants, tigers and leopards, as well as smaller wonders such as flying squirrels, lizards, monkeys, deer, tapirs and serpents of all sorts. Reticulated python



KARL LEHMANN/GETTY IMAGES ©



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Mt Kinabalu, Sabah

12 It is the abode of the spirits, the highest mountain in Malaysia, one of the most dominant geographic features in North Borneo, the bone-shaking trek that has worn out countless challengers. Mt Kinabalu (p322) is all this as well as one of the most popular tourist attractions in Borneo. Don't worry – you will still have moments of utter freedom, breathing in the only alpine air in Sabah and, if you're lucky, enjoying a horizon that stretches to the Philippines. Or it will be cloudy. Whatever: the climb is still bloody exhilarating.

Cameron Highlands, Perak

13 Misty mountains, gumboots, Tudor-themed architecture, scones, strawberries and tea plantations all converge in this distinctly un-Southeast Asian destination. Activities such as self-guided hiking, nature trekking and agricultural tourism make the Cameron Highlands (p126) one of Malaysia's most worthwhile and approachable active destinations. It also represents a clever escape within a vacation, as the weather in the Cameron Highlands tends to stay cool year-round. Boh Sungei Palas Tea Estate (p127)



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Markets, Kota Bharu, Kelantan

14 A centre for Malaysian crafts, Kota Bharu (p273) offers traditional items such as batik, *kain songket* (fabric with gold thread), hand-crafted silverware, hand-carved puppets and locally made kites. Both the Central Market and the nearby Bazaar Buluh Kubuh (p279) are great places to buy spices, brassware and other local goods. For shoppers inclined to roam, the bikeable road from town to PCB beach is dotted with factories and workshops dedicated to the creation of crafts of all sorts.

Chillin', Pulau Tioman, Pahang

15 Welcome to paradise. What's your pleasure? Swimming off any of the dozens of beautiful beaches that run along Pulau Tioman's western shore? Challenging the surf that pounds the island's eastern beaches? Perhaps hiking is more your thing? If so, Tioman's myriad trails will challenge your legs, lungs and internal compass. Care to chill out by a waterfall? Swing in a hammock with a good book? Or simply do nothing? All of these goals (and others) are obtainable on Pulau Tioman (p243).



16

ANNE'S BLOOMING/ISTOCK/IMAGES ©



17

ELI KUTUMATI/ALAMY ©

Visiting Longhouses, Sarawak

16 There's no better way to get a sense of indigenous tribal culture than to visit a longhouse (p404) – or, better yet, stay in one. Basically a whole village under one roof, these dwellings can be longer than two football fields and contain dozens of family units, each of which opens onto a covered common verandah used for economic activities, socialising and celebrations. All longhouses now feature at least some modern amenities, but many still have a few headhunted skulls on display. Longhouse at Sarawak Cultural Village (p404)

Jonker's Walk Night Market, Melaka

17 It starts by the river across from the pink Stadthuys building that glows in the street lights. Dr Ho Eng Hui is doing his nightly street show with a crowd in a circle around him; he makes kung-fu moves to the theme music of *Hawaii Five-O*. Edge through the crush along Jonker's Walk (p220, lined with stalls selling everything from cheap underwear to fresh sugarcane juice. Haggle, nibble and maybe stop by the Geographer cafe for a cold beer and some people-watching.

Chinatown, Kuala Lumpur

18 Plumes of smoke curl up from smouldering coils of incense, flower garlands hang like pearls from the necks of Hindu statues, and the call to prayer punctuates the honk of traffic. The temples and mosques of the city's Hindus, Muslims and Chinese Buddhists are shoulder-to-shoulder in this atmospheric neighbourhood (p51) that epitomises multicultural Malaysia. Don't miss the daytime Madras Lane hawker stalls and the bustle and fun of the night market along Jln Petaling (p72). See Ya Temple (p52)

Festivals, Batu Caves

19 It's always a very busy and colourful scene at this sacred Hindu shrine but, if you can, time your visit for a holy day. The biggest event is Thaipusam (p22), when around one million pilgrims converge on this giant limestone outcrop a few kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur. Guarding the 272 steps that lead up to the main Temple Cave is the 43m gilded statue of Lord Murugan, assisted by a platoon of lively macaques who show little fear in launching raids on tourists' belongings.





20

HEATH HOLDEN/GETTY IMAGES ©

Singapore Zoo & Night Safari, Singapore

20 Cheeky orang-utans swinging metres above your head, a carefree sloth chomping inches away from your nose. It might sound like the depths of some primeval rainforest, but you're actually at Singapore Zoo (p493). Arguably the world's top urban animal sanctuary, its lush 28 hectares ditch soul-crunching cages for open-concept enclosures and faithfully recreated habitats. The result: happy, free-roaming animals and happy humans with unobstructed views. As the sun sinks, neighbouring Night Safari (p494) cranks up the atmosphere with its own cast of oh-so-close creatures, from swooping Malayan flying foxes to sneaky alligators. White tigers, Singapore Zoo (p493)

need to know

Currency

» Malaysian ringgit (RM), Singapore dollar (S\$), Brunei dollar (B\$).

Language

» Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese dialects, Tamil.

When to Go



Tropical climate, rain year round
Tropical climate, wet & dry seasons

High Season (Dec–Feb)

» End-of-year school holidays followed by Chinese New Year push up prices. Book transport and hotels in advance.

» Monsoon season for the east coast of Peninsula Malaysia and western Sarawak.

Shoulder (Jul–Nov)

» July to August, vie with visitors escaping the heat of the Gulf States as the region enjoys what it calls Arab Season.

» The end of Ramadan (Hari Raya) also sees increased travel activity in the region.

Low Season (Mar–Jun)

» Avoid the worst of the rains and humidity; there's also the chance to enjoy places without the crush of fellow tourists.

Your Daily Budget

Budget less than

**RM100/
S\$150/B\$40**

» Dorm bed; RM12–35/S\$16–40/B\$10.

» Hawker centres and food courts for meals.

» Use public transport; plan sightseeing around walking tours, free museums and galleries.

Midrange

**RM100–400/
S\$150–350/
B\$40–100**

» Double room in midrange hotel: RM100–400/S\$100–250/B\$70.

» Two-course meal in midrange restaurant RM40–60/S\$50/B\$10.

» Take taxis and guided tours of cities and nature sights.

Top End more than

**RM400/
S\$350/B\$100**

» Luxury double room RM450–1000/S\$250–500/B\$170.

» Meal in top restaurant RM200/S\$250/B\$20.

Money

» ATMs widely available. Credit cards accepted by most businesses.

Visas

» Generally not required for stays of up to 60 (Malaysia), 90 (Singapore) and 30–90 days (Brunei).

Mobile Phones

» Local SIM cards can be used in most phones; if not, set your phone to roaming.

Transport

» Buses and trains run to many destinations on Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore; planes and boats go to major cities, islands and more remote destinations.

Websites

» **Tourism Malaysia** (www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my) Official national tourist-information site.

» **Visit Singapore** (www.visitsingapore.com) Official tourism board site.

» **Brunei Tourism** (www.brunetourism.travel) Oodles of useful information.

» **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) Information, bookings, forums and more.

» **Malaysiakini** (www.malaysiakini.com) Find out what's really going on in Malaysia.

Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	RM3	S\$1.28	B\$1.28
Canada	C\$1	RM3	S\$1.23	B\$1.23
Europe	€1	RM4	S\$1.59	B\$1.59
Japan	¥100	RM4	S\$1.48	B\$1.48
UK	UK£1	RM5	S\$1.96	B\$1.96
US	US\$1	RM3	S\$1.22	B\$1.22

For current exchange rates see www.xe.com.

Important Numbers

	Mal	Sin	Bru
Country code	60	65	673
International access code	00	001	00
Police	999	999	993
Ambulance/Fire	994	995	991/995
Directory assistance	103	100	113

Arriving in Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

» Kuala Lumpur International Airport

Trains RM35; every 15 min from 5am–1am; 30 min to KL Sentral. Buses RM10; every hr from 5am to 1am; 1hr to KL Sentral. Taxis from RM75; 1hr to KL

» Changi International Airport


MRT train, public and shuttle bus to town, 6am to midnight, S\$1.80 to S\$9. Taxi \$18–35

» Brunei International Airport

Buses 23, 24, 36 and 38 to Bandar Seri Begawan. Taxi B\$20–25

Responsible Travel

Cutting your carbon footprint by travelling overland to Peninsular Malaysia from Europe and most parts of Asia is possible as long as you're not in a hurry. The authoritative **Man in Seat 61** (www.seat61.com/Malaysia.htm) reckons it takes a minimum of 3 ½ weeks to reach KL from London by a combination of trains and buses.

Once in the region consider making your travels more sustainable by taking part in a homestay program, doing some volunteer work (p598), and supporting traditional craft industries when buying souvenirs. Check out recommendations by **Wild Asia** (www.wildasia.net), which seeks to up standards by handing out sustainable tourism awards. Also see our sustainable picks throughout the guide (indicated by .

if you like...



Architecture

Vividly painted and handsomely proportioned wooden Malay houses pepper the region alongside a variety of interestingly decorated temples, mosques and churches. Adding to the rich architectural mix are colonial structures, and contemporary skyscrapers and civic complexes.

George Town Learn about the temples, shophouses, house museums and other unique structures of this Unesco World Heritage city via a guided tour. (p151)

Kampung Ayer The largest water village in the world, part of Brunei's capital, is a testament to Malay ingenuity and improvisation. (p456)

Petronas Towers The steel wrapped twin towers are the poster children of contemporary architecture in Malaysia. (p55)

Putrajaya See what a booming economy can buy in this showcase of modern urban planning and vaulting architectural ambition. (p104)

Melaka's Chinatown Malaysia's oldest functioning mosque, Catholic church and traditional Chinese temple are all within walking distance of each other. (p213)

Scenic Vistas

Bring your camera and sketch book because there's much visual beauty to capture in these three countries. As well as lush jungle scenery and idyllic palm-fringed beaches, sweeping panoramas of Southeast Asian metropolises and eye-poppingly colourful markets will be among your favourite scenic memories.

Tea plantations The Cameron Highlands' tea plantations comprise a landscape that is equal parts manicured and wild, not to mention breathtaking. (p126)

Gunung Stong State Park View one of the Peninsula's most spectacular waterfalls in this beautiful and relatively untrammeled park. (p282)

Southern Ridges Forest canopy, striking architecture and skyline views join forces on this urban nature trail along Singapore's southern coast. (p495)

Mt Kinabalu Assuming the weather is clear, you can't beat the view from the top of Malaysia's tallest mountain. (p322)

Atmosphere 360 Enjoy sweeping city views from the slowly revolving restaurant atop Menara KL. (p67)

Legendary Experiences

Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are all steeped in legends and home to diverse cultures that have unique ways of doing things. So be prepared for lands where hungry ghosts are fed and fabled species can still be discovered in the region's dense jungles.

Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion

More than just a collection of dusty antique furniture and old family photos, a visit to this refurbished George Town mansion is a fascinating crash course in feng shui and local legend. (p159)

Bukit Brown Cemetery

In Singapore you'll find the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China, laced with ornate tombs and history-bearing jungle. (p496)

Endau-Rompin National Park

Be alert on your jungle trek and you may just spot the Snaggletoothed ghost – Malaysia's own yeti. (p239)

Melaka's themed trishaws

Look for 'Becak Man' (with the Bat Man logo), or the Barbie mobile and turn up the sound system. (p225)



RICHARD JINSON/GETTY IMAGES ©

» George Town art (p162)

Museums

Learn about the region's history and salad bowl of cultures by exploring the many museums scattered across these three countries.

National Museum of Singapore Heritage architecture meets interactive ingenuity at this ode to Singaporean history, culture and food. (p476)

Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore An epic, evocative journey through the history, beliefs and creativity of the world's largest continent. (p477)

Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur Marvel at how craftspeople and artists have been inspired by the Muslim faith to produce gorgeous objects. (p53)

Sarawak Museum Displays one of the world's finest collections of indigenous Bornean art and artefacts. (p386)

Contemporary Art

The region's artists are a talented lot with their works on display in national institutions, commercial galleries, on the streets and in shopping malls.

Sekeping Tenggiri One of the best private collections of Malaysian contemporary art is in this KL guesthouse. (p65)

Singapore Art Museum An excellent showcase of Asian contemporary art. Also check out the new commercial galleries at Gillman Barracks. (p477)

Melaka's art galleries Browse an eclectic selection at the small galleries scattered around the World Heritage district. (p214)

George Town's street art Comical steel sculptures and quirky painted murals are a fun addition to the city's historic core. (p162)

Publika This innovative KL mall is decorated with eye-catching contemporary pieces and has several galleries. (p90)

Crafts & Shopping

Leave room in your suitcase for some beautiful traditional crafts including wood carvings, shadow puppets, fabrics and printings. All other consumer cravings are well tended to by a vast range of shopping complexes and megamalls.

Little Penang Street Market If you're a hopeless shopaholic, or are simply in need of a worthwhile souvenir, make sure your visit to George Town coincides with the last Sunday of the month and this popular open-air market. (p173)

Orchard Rd Megamalls, chic boutiques and retro gems fight for space on Singapore's legendary shopping strip. (p535)

Kuching's Main Bazaar Browse a wide selection of handmade Dayak crafts including textiles, baskets and masks as well as local foods and spices. (p396)

National Textiles Museum, Kuala Lumpur Admire skilful weaving, embroidery, knitting and batik printing. (p52).

month by month

Hindus, Muslims and Chinese all follow a lunar calendar, so the dates for many religious festivals vary each year. Muslim holidays typically move forward 11 days each year, while Hindu and Chinese festivals change dates but fall roughly within the same months. Dates have been given where they are known, but may be subject to slight changes.

January

New Year is a busy travel period. It's monsoon season on Malaysia's east coast and Sarawak.



Thaipusam

Enormous crowds converge at the Batu Caves north of KL, the Nattukotai Chettiar Temple in Penang and in Singapore for this dramatic Hindu festival involving body piercing. Falls between mid-January and mid-February.

February

Chinese New Year is a big deal throughout the region and a busy travel period – book transport and hotels well ahead.



Chinese New Year

Dragon dances and pedestrian parades mark the start of the new year. Families hold open house. Celebrated on 31 January 2014, 19 February 2015 and 8 February 2016.



Chingay

Singapore's biggest street parade (www.chingay.org.sg), a flamboyant, multicultural event, falls on the 22nd day after Chinese New Year.

April

The light monsoon season ends on Malaysia's west coast, but you should still always be prepared for rain.



Petronas Malaysian

Grand Prix

Formula 1's first big outing of the year (www.malaysia.ngp.com) in Southeast Asia is held at the Sepang International Circuit over three days, usually at the start of the month. Associated events and parties are held in KL.

Top Events

1

Thaipusam, January or February

2

Chinese New Year, January or February

3

Hungry Ghosts Festival, August

4

Chingay, February

5

Rainforest World Music Festival, July

May

This quiet month, prior to the busy school holidays, is a good time to visit the region.



Wesak (Vesak) Day

Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death are celebrated with various events, including the release of caged birds to symbolise the setting free of captive souls, and processions in KL, Singapore and other major cities. Celebrated on 24 May 2013, 13 May 2014 and 1 June 2015.

June

School holidays and one of the hottest months so get ready to sweat it out.



Gawai Dayak

Held on 1 and 2 June but beginning on the evening of 31 May, this Sarawak-wide Dayak festival celebrates the end of the rice-harvest season.



Dragon Boat Festival

Commemorates the Malay legend of the fishermen

who paddled out to sea to prevent the drowning of a Chinese saint, beating drums to scare away any fish that might attack him. Celebrated from June to August, with boat races in Penang.

July

Busy travel month for Malaysian Borneo so book ahead for activities, tours and accommodation.



George Town Festival

This arts and performance festival (www.georgetownfestival.com) includes international artists, innovative street performances and new street art.



Rainforest World Music Festival

A three-day musical extravaganza (www.rainforestmusic-borneo.com) held in the Sarawak Cultural Village near Kuching in the 2nd week of July.



Singapore Food Festival

This month-long celebration of food (www.singaporefoodfestival.com) includes events, cooking classes and food-themed tours.



Sultan of Brunei's Birthday

Colourful official ceremonies (www.royalbirthday.org.bn) are held on 15 July to mark the Sultan's birthday and include an elaborate military ceremony presided over by the supremo himself.

August

Ramadan may fall in this month, so look out for night food markets.



Singapore National Day

Held on 9 August (though dress rehearsals on the two prior weekends are almost as popular), Singapore National Day (www.ndp.org.sg) includes military parades, fly-overs and fireworks.



Hungry Ghost Festival

Chinese communities perform operas, host open-air concerts and lay out food for their ancestors. Celebrated towards the end of the month and in early September.



Malaysia's National Day

Join the crowds at midnight on 31 August to celebrate the anniversary of Malaysia's independence in 1957. Events are usually held in Dataran Merdeka in KL. There are parades and festivities the next morning across the country.

September

Haze from forest and field clearance fires in Indonesia create urban smog across the region.



Hari Raya Puasa

The Muslim fasting month of Ramadan culminates in this major festival traditionally celebrated at home with big banquets; the Malaysian prime minister

opens his official home in Putrajaya to the public.



Singtel Singapore Grand Prix

It's Singapore's turn to host the Formula 1 crowd with a night race (www.singaporegp.sg) on a scenic city-centre circuit. Book well in advance for hotel rooms with a view.

October

Start of the monsoon season on Malaysia's west coast, but it's not so heavy or constant to affect most travel plans.



Deepavali

Tiny oil lamps are lit outside Hindu homes to attract the auspicious gods Rama and Lakshmi. Indian businesses start the new financial year, with Little Indias across the region ablaze with lights.

December

A sense of festivity (and monsoon rains in Singapore and east coast Malaysia) permeates the air as the year winds down. Christmas is a big deal in Singapore, with impressive light displays on Orchard Rd.



Zoukout

Held on Siloso Beach, Sentosa, this annual outdoor dance party (www.zoukout.com) is one of the region's best such events with a 25,000-strong crowd bopping to international DJs.

itineraries

Whether you've got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travellers.



Two Weeks

Essential Malaysia & Singapore

Ease yourself into Malaysian life by spending three days in **Kuala Lumpur (KL)**. On your to see and do list should be the **Petronas Towers**, **Chinatown** for shopping and eating, and the Lake Gardens for the **KL Bird Park** and **Islamic Arts Museum**.

Head to the magnificent national park **Taman Negara** where even on a two-day visit you can clamber across the canopy walkway and make some short jungle treks. Return to KL and hop on a flight to **Penang** where three days will give you a good taste of the heritage district of **George Town** and other island highlights such as **Kek Lok Si Temple**.

Historic **Melaka**, another Unesco World Heritage Site, deserves a couple of nights but visit midweek to avoid the crowds. Then head across the causeway to **Singapore** where you can spend your final four days enjoying everything from maxing out your credit card at glitzy shopping malls and sampling delicious hawker food to the eye-boggling space age architecture of **Marina Bay**, the excellent **zoo and night safari**, and the vacation island of **Sentosa** for some beachside R & R.



Six Weeks The Grand Tour

Schedule a week in **KL** and surrounds for sightseeing and acclimatisation. Day trips could include **Batu Caves**, **Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM)** and **Putrajaya**, the nation's fast-evolving administrative capital and a showcase of modern Malaysian architecture. The sleepy old royal capital of **Kuala Selangor**, near to which you can observe the dazzling natural display of fireflies, is also only a couple of hours drive from KL.

After a pit stop in the happening foodie destination of **Ipoh**, which has some great accommodation options, your second week takes you up to the **Cameron Highlands** for a cooler climate and invigorating walks past verdant tea plantations. Return to the coast and hop across to **Pulau Pangkor** for a few days further relaxation on this off-the-beaten track island with white sand beaches and jungle interior.

Suitably refreshed you should be ready for the urban delights of **George Town** on **Penang**, particularly the Unesco World Heritage district packed with colourful, fascinating sights. Do plenty of walking to work up an appetite, as Penang is also Malaysia's number one food destination with oodles of tempting dishes to sample. A quick flight away are the resorts, gorgeous beaches and jungle hinterlands of **Pulau Langkawi**.

Into week four and it's time to cross the mountainous spine of the peninsula to **Kota Bharu**, a great place to encounter traditional Malay culture. Island- and beach-hop down the east coast, pausing at **Pulau Perhentian**, **Cherating** and **Pulau Tioman**. For jungle adventures head to **Taman Negara** or, to avoid the crowds, opt for nearby **Kenong Rimba State Park**.

Singapore can easily swallow up a week of shopping, museum viewing and world-class eating. From here you can fly to **Kuching** in Sarawak, a good base for a longhouse excursion or for arranging a trek in the **Gunung Mulu National Park**. Rack up the visa stamps by taking the overland and river route from Sarawak to Sabah via Brunei stopping in the capital **Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB)**.

Having made it to Sabah's capital **Kota Kinabalu**, your final challenge, should you choose to accept it, is to climb **Mt Kinabalu**. Alternatively, it's difficult to resist the chance to eyeball close up the supercute ginger apes at **Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre**.



One Month Ultimate Borneo

From **Kuching** explore the local **long-houses** and **Bako National Park**. Fly to **Miri**, which is the base for trips to the impressive **Niah Caves**; **Gunung Mulu National Park** for more caves (the world's biggest), the heart-pumping trek to the Pinnacles and a sweat-drenching trek along the Headhunters Trail; and **Bario**, a quiet farming community tucked away in the vine-draped **Kelabit Highlands**.

You'll need to pass through Miri again to make your way overland to **Bandar Seri Begawan**, Brunei's friendly microcapital. While here don't miss out on **Ulu Temburong National Park** in Temburong, Brunei's pristine sliver of primary rainforest.

Cross back into Malaysia and pause in **Kota Kinabalu** before setting your sights on **Mt Kinabalu**. Catch some ape love at **Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre**, followed by a layover in **Sandakan** for a brief lesson in colonial history. The mighty **Sungai Kinabatangan** is next, offering wildlife enthusiasts plenty of photo fodder. If you've got the time (and the dime), head deep into Sabah's green interior for a trek through the **Danum Valley Conservation Area**. Explore the magnificent dive sites of the **Semporna Archipelago** accessed from **Semporna**.

Two Weeks Sabah-Sarawak Sampler

Start with Sabah's star attraction, **Mt Kinabalu**. Assaults on Malaysia's highest peak can be launched from the state's government seat, **Kota Kinabalu (KK)**, which encapsulates South-east Asian city life on a manageable scale. You'll be obliged to spend a day or two here sorting permits, during which you can stoke up on energy by indulging in the flavourful local cuisine. Consider a day-trip cruise (including buffet dinner) down one of the tea-brown rivers in the **Beaufort Division**, or learn a little about the local culture at the **Mari Mari Cultural Village**.

Leapfrog by plane from KK to Miri and then on to **Gunung Mulu National Park**, home to the world's largest caves, and several memorable jungle treks, including the notorious Headhunters Trail. Pass through Miri once more for a quick flight down to **Kuching**. Sarawak's capital is a real charmer and will easily keep you occupied for several days. Break up your time in town with a visit to **Semenggoh Wildlife Centre**, **Bako National Park** and, if you have time, to a longhouse such as **Annah Rais Longhouse**.



Three Weeks Jewels of the North

Explore **KL** for a few days then take a bus across the peninsula to **Kuantan**. Beach- and island-hop up the east coast pausing in laid-back **Cherating** and **Kuala Terengganu**, with its pretty Chinatown and the **Kompleks Muzium Negeri Terengganu**. At **Penarik** see fireflies and stay at the **Terrapuri Heritage Village**, a resort made up of 29 classically furnished antique houses.

Although other island idylls await further up the coast it's difficult to ignore the Perhentians, accessed from Kuala Besut. **Pulau Perhentian Besar** tends to be less crowded and just as gorgeous as its more popular twin, **Pulau Perhentian Kecil**. Back on the mainland, linger a day or two in **Kota Bharu**, for its museums, cultural events and night market, then head to northern Perak, making the **Royal Belum State Park** your base.

Dig into fish-head curry in **Alor Setar** before taking the ferry from **Kuala Perlis** to **Pulau Langkawi** where there's yet more opportunities for sunbathing, island hopping and jungle exploration. Fly to **George Town**, the essential stop on Penang. Connect to **Ipoh** from where you could cool off in **Fraser's Hill** (Bukit Fraser) before returning to KL.

Three Weeks Southern Comforts

Singapore is the logical start and finish to this loop around the southern end of Peninsula Malaysia; leave yourself several days to soak up its multiple attractions. If you're strapped for cash then **Johor Bahru** just across the causeway is a cheaper base. Recently spruced up, it's become a decent hangout, not least for its street food and duty-free booze.

The lethargic riverside town of **Muar** has a graceful colonial district that's worth a look, and can be used as a base for assaults on 1276m Gunung Ledang, Johor's highest mountain, within the **Gunung Ledang National Park**. Recover in World Heritage-listed **Melaka** where you can spend several days soaking up the enduring Portuguese and Dutch influence.

Explore the last remaining stands of lowland forest on the peninsula in **Endau-Rompin National Park**, the last refuge of the Sumatran rhinoceros. Stunning **Pulau Tioman** has epitomised an island paradise since it doubled for Bali Hai in *South Pacific*. Alternatively, indulge in some island hopping and diving around the 64 comparatively little visited gems of the **Seribu Archipelago**.



Outdoor Adventures

Best Jungle Treks

Taman Negara
Maliau Basin
Kelabit Highlands
Endau-Rompin National Park
Ulu Temburong National Park

Best Mountain Climbing

Mt Kinabalu
Gunung Ledang
Gunung Mulu
Gunung Tahan
Mt Trus Madi

Best Diving and Snorkelling

Semporna Archipelago
Pulau Perhentian
Pulau Redang
Pulau Tioman
Seribu Archipelago

Best Caving

Gunung Mulu National Park
Niah National Park
Gomantong Caves
Wind Cave Nature Reserve

It's a jungle out there – and that's a good thing! Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei offer a broad range of treks through some of the world's oldest undisturbed areas of rainforest, from simple strolls along marked paths to multiday marathons practically hacking through virgin jungle. If that doesn't appeal to the adventurer in you, then there are mountains to climb, caves to explore and tropical seas teeming with marine life to dive as well as other aquatic-based activities such as surfing, yachting, kayaking and white-water rafting.

Trekking

Fancy seeing what life was possibly like 100 million years ago? Trekking into the deepest parts of the region's jungles will give you a clue as they were largely unaffected by the far-reaching climatic changes brought on elsewhere by the Ice Age. Significant chunks of these rainforests have been made into national parks, in which all commercial activities apart from tourism are banned.

The British established the first national park in Malaysia in 1938 and it is now included in Taman Negara, the crowning glory of Malaysia's network of national parks, which crosses the borders of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang. In addition to this and the 27 other national and state parks across the country (23 of them located in Malaysian

Borneo), there are various government-protected reserves and sanctuaries for forests, birds, mammals and marine life. Even in the heart of KL it's possible to stretch your legs in the Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve; alternatively head a little north of the city to find a fantastic network of forest trails and the suspended walkway at the Forestry Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM, p100).

Only 1 sq km of Brunei's 500 sq km Ulu Temburong National Park is accessible to the public, but what a treat it presents being one of the most pristine slices of rainforest in the region. Even Singapore offers up trekking possibilities: the country's National Parks Board manages 10% of the island's total land area, which comprises over 50 major parks and four nature reserves, including Bukit Timah Nature Reserve.

When to Go

The region has wet months and less wet months. Global warming has also affected the monsoons so that year to year precipitation varies widely. In short, no matter where or when you go, you're likely to get wet – and if not from rain then certainly from sweating!

What is seasonal, however, is the number of other travellers you'll be competing with for experienced guides and lodgings. Northern hemisphere residents often come to the region during the summer holidays in their home countries, so if you plan to trek in July or August book a tour far in advance. Also watch out for regional travel highpoints such as Chinese New Year holidays and the so-called 'Golden Week' of holidays that Japanese people usually take late in April or early May.

Permits, Guides & Bookings

Many of the region's national parks and natural beauty spots charge a nominal entrance fee – around RM10. At a few, if you wish to trek or engage in other activities such as fishing or mountain climbing, then there may be additional permits to purchase and guides to hire. In particular, Mt Kinabalu has stringent visitor regulations, as does Gunung Mulu National Park.

Accommodation is generally not a problem when visiting most national parks. Various types are available, from hostel to luxury resorts. Transport and accommodation operations are increasingly being handled

TOP WILDLIFE SPOTS

Taman Negara (p260) Malaysia's oldest and most prestigious national park is home to everything from fireflies to elephants.

Royal Belum State Park (p147) Home to 10 varieties of hornbill and most of Malaysia's big mammals.

Sungai Kinabatangan (p348) Spot wild orang-utans and pygmy elephants along the banks of Sabah's longest river.

Bako National Park (p400) One of the region's best places to see proboscis monkeys.

Singapore Zoo (p493) One of the world's best, along with the Night Safari and the new River Safari experience.

Ulu Temburong National Park (p470) Breathtaking forest canopy views in Brunei's Temburong region.

by private tour companies, who require you to book in advance and pay a deposit.

Many national parks have well-marked day trails and can be walked unaccompanied. But for almost all overnights, only a fool would set out without a local guide. Remember, trail maps of any sort are completely unavailable and signage along remote trail networks is nonexistent. A good guide will be able to gauge your abilities and push you a little, rather than taking the easiest way as a matter of course. Try a shorter guided hike before setting off on an overnight adventure to get a sense of how you fare in tropical trekking conditions.

Especially in Sabah, Brunei and Sarawak, the national parks are very strict about allowing only licensed guides. We've heard stories of groups being turned back when they arrived with an uncertified leader. Before you fork over any cash, compare notes with other travellers and ask to see the guide's national-park certification.

Guides for day walks can sometimes be hired at national park HQ, but for overnights you'll need to contact either a freelance guide or a tour agency. Budget from RM50 to RM200 per day for a guide depending on the duration and difficulty of the trek you are planning.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

Jungle trekking can be one of the highlights of a trip to the region. However, to the uninitiated, it can be something of a shock – like marching all day in a sauna with a pile of bricks strapped to your back. To make the experience as painless as possible, it's necessary to make some preparations:

- » On overnight trips, bring two sets of clothing, one for hiking and one to wear at the end of the day (always keep your night kit separate and dry in a plastic bag). Within minutes of starting, your hiking kit will be drenched and will stay that way throughout your trip.
- » If you'll be travelling through dense vegetation, wear long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. Otherwise, shorts and a T-shirt will suffice. Whatever you wear, make sure that it's loose fitting.
- » Bring fast-drying synthetic clothes. Once cotton gets wet it won't dry until you bring it to the laundry back in town.
- » It can be cool in the evening, so bring a fleece top to keep warm.
- » Unless you like a lot of support, consider hiking in running shoes with good traction. You could also go local and buy a pair of 'kampung Adidas' – a Malaysian jungle version of a hiking shoe, shaped like an Adidas soccer cleat but made out of rubber (like a souped-up Croc). They're cheap (around RM5 a pair) and popular with porters and guides.
- » Buy a pair of light-coloured leech socks – they're not easy to come by in the region so buy them online before coming.
- » Drink plenty of water. If you're going long distances, you'll have to bring either a water filter or a water-purification agent like iodine (most people opt for the latter to keep weight down).
- » Get in shape long before coming to the region and start slowly, with day hikes before longer treks.
- » Always go with a guide unless you're on a well-marked, commonly travelled trail.
- » Wear loose underwear to help prevent chafing. Bring talcum powder to cope with the chafing caused by wet undergarments.
- » If you wear glasses, treat them with an antifog solution (ask at the shop where you buy your glasses).
- » Consider putting something waterproof over the back padding to keep the sweat out of your pack, or consider a waterproof stuff sack.
- » Keep your camera in a waterproof container, with a pouch of silica gel or other desiccant.
- » Pack sunscreen, insect repellent, a water bottle and a torch (preferably a headlamp to keep your hands free).

The following points are also worth bearing in mind if you are planning a mountaineering or caving adventure:

- » Hire a local guide – it's the best way to make sure you're in touch with local customs and concerns as you move through tribal lands.
- » Follow the golden rule of rubbish: if you carried it in, carry it out. Never bury your rubbish – it may be out of sight, but it won't be out of reach of animals.
- » Where there isn't a toilet, bury your waste in a small hole 15cm deep and at least 100m from any watercourse. Use toilet paper sparingly and cover everything with soil and a rock.
- » Always stick to the marked trails, however indistinct they may be. Carving your own path through the jungle can disrupt local people, not to mention the plants and wildlife.

Mountain & Rock Climbing

Towering above the forests of Borneo are some brilliant mountains. Even nonclimbers know about 4095m Mt Kinabalu, the highest peak between the Himalayas and the island of New Guinea. This craggy monster simply begs to be climbed, and there is something magical about starting the ascent in humid tropical jungle and emerging into a bare, rocky alpine zone so cold that snow has been known to fall. But beyond the transition from hot to cold, it's the weird world of the summit plateau that makes Mt Kinabalu among the world's most interesting peaks. It's got a dash of Yosemite and a pinch of Torres del Paine, but at the end of the day, it's pure Borneo.

Sabah's second highest peak, Mt Trus Madi (2642m), is a far more difficult peak to ascend than Mt Kinabalu – and a more difficult trip to arrange.

Gunung Mulu (2376m) isn't quite as high but it's almost as famous, thanks in part to being a Unesco World Heritage Site. If you're a real glutton for punishment, you'll probably find the five-day return trek to the summit of this peak to your liking. Those who make the journey experience a variety of

pristine natural environments, starting with lowland dipterocarp forest and ending with rhododendron and montane forest.

Pulau Berhala in the Sandakan Archipelago is also a prime destination for rock climbers; Fieldskills Adventures (p311) arranges rock climbing tours here.

On the peninsula, Gunung Ledang (1276m) is a good introduction to tropical mountaineering. There are also several good climbs in Taman Negara, including Gunung Tahan (2187m), an expedition that takes between seven to nine days.

Costs

Guide fees could be anything between RM100 and RM200 per day. There will also be national park entry fees (RM1 to RM15) and climbing permits (RM100 in the case of Mt Kinabalu) to consider.

Pre-Trip Preparations

Climbing one of Malaysia's mountains is like a jungle trek except more – more exhausting, more psychologically challenging and especially more vertical. Be prepared for ascents that turn your legs to rubber and much colder weather.

MALAYSIA'S TOP 10 NATIONAL & STATE PARKS

PARK	FEATURES	ACTIVITIES	BEST TIME TO VISIT
Bako	beaches, proboscis monkeys	coastline walks, trekking	May-Sep
Batang Ai	primary forest crawling with wild orang-utan	trekking	year-round
Endau-Rompin	lowland forest, unique plants, Sumatran rhinos, waterfalls and rivers	trekking, wildlife-spotting	Apr-Sep
Gunung Mulu	caves, the Pinnacles, Headhunters Trail	caving, trekking, mountain climbing	May-Sep
Kinabalu	Mt Kinabalu	mountain climbing	May-Sep
Niah	caves	caving, trekking	May-Sep
Penang	meromictic lake, monkeys	trekking	Apr-Jul
Taman Negara Perlis	Gua Wang Burma cave, stump-tailed macaques, Malaysia's only semideciduous forest	caving, trekking	Jun-Aug
Taman Negara	canopy walkway, hides, jungle trails, rivers	trekking, wildlife-spotting, river trips	Apr-Sep
Tun Sakaran	sand-fringed islands, technicolour reefs	snorkelling, diving	year-round



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- » (above) Gunung Mulu National Park (p438), Sarawak, Borneo
- » (left) White-water rafting in Kedah (p184), Malaysia

As with longer treks, book well ahead. Many of the agencies that handle trekking also offer mountain ascents. Some of the more experienced guides in Sarawak's Kelabit Highlands can take you to two rarely climbed peaks, Batu Lawi and Gunung Murud.

Keen mountain climbers should search out a copy of *Mountains of Malaysia – A Practical Guide and Manual* by John Briggs.

Caving

Slice one of Malaysia's limestone hills in half and chances are you'll find that inside it looks like Swiss cheese. Malaysians have been living, harvesting birds' nests, planning insurgencies and burying their dead in these caves (*gua*) for tens of thousands of years. These days, the country's subterranean spaces – including some of the largest caverns anywhere on earth – are quiet, except for the flow of underground streams, the drip of stalactites and the whoosh of the wings of swiftlets and bats.

Sarawak's Gunung Mulu National Park is a place of spelunking superlatives. It's got the world's second-largest cave passage (the Deer Cave, 2km in length and 174m in height), the world's largest cave chamber (the Sarawak Chamber, 700m long, 400m wide and 70m high) and Asia's longest cave (the Clearwater Cave, 107km in length). Several of the park's caves are – like their counterparts in Niah National Park – accessible to nonspelunkers: you can walk through them on well-maintained walkways.

Other caves open to the public include the Dark Cave at the Batu Caves; various caverns in and around Gunung Stong State Park; those in Taman Negara; and the Gomantong Caves in Sabah.

Pre-Trip Preparations

A pitch-black passageway deep in the bowels of the earth is not the ideal place to discover that you can't deal with narrow, confined spaces. Before heading underground, seriously consider your susceptibility to claustrophobia and fear of heights (some caves require scaling underground cliffs). If you have any concerns about a specific route, talk with your guide beforehand.

Be prepared to crawl through muck, including bat guano, and bring clothes you won't mind getting filthy (some guides and agencies supply these).

Aquatic Adventures

Diving & Snorkelling

Reasonable prices, an excellent variety of dive sites and easy access make Malaysia a great diving choice for both first-timers and old hands. Island-based boat dives are the most common, but a few areas, like Sabah's Pulau Sipadan, have some cracking sites right off the beach. You may also come across live-aboard boats to get you to more remote spots.

The standards of diving facilities in Malaysia are generally quite high and equipment rental is widely available. Most places offer the universally recognised Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certification.

When to Go

The northeast monsoon brings strong winds and rain to the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia from early November to late February, during which time most dive centres simply shut down. Visibility improves after

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Consider the following tips when diving or snorkelling, and help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- » Do not use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- » Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body, or dragging equipment across the reef.
- » Be conscious of your fins. Clouds of sand or even the surge from heavy fin strokes can damage delicate organisms.
- » Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef, so practise buoyancy control across your trip.
- » Resist the temptation to collect (or buy) coral or shells from reefs of dive sites. Some sites are even protected from looting by law.
- » Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find.
- » Don't feed the fish, as this can disturb their habits or be detrimental to their health.

the monsoon, peaking in August and September. On the west coast conditions are reversed and the best diving is from September to March. In Malaysian Borneo the monsoons are less pronounced and rain falls more evenly throughout the year, making diving a year-round activity.

Costs

Most dive centres charge around RM200 to RM300 for two dives, including equipment rental. A three-dive day trip at Sipadan costs around RM700. PADI open-water courses average around RM800. Many resorts and dive operators also offer all-inclusive dive packages, which vary widely in price.

Pre- & Post-Trip

While it is possible simply to show up and dive at some of the larger dive centres like Pulau Tioman, it's a good idea to make arrangements in advance, if only to avoid waiting a day or two before starting. Diving at Sipadan is capped at 120 divers per day.

Note that it is unsafe to dive directly after flying due to poorly pressurised cabins and dehydration. It's also a serious health risk to fly within 24 hours of your last dive.

Kayaking & White-Water Rafting

Malaysia's mountains and rainforests equal fast-flowing rivers, which result in ideal opportunities for rafting and kayaking enthusiasts.

On the peninsula, Kuala Kubu Bharu has become the white-water hot spot, with rafting and kayaking organised along the Sungai Selangor; **Pierose Swiftwater** (www.raftmalaysia.com) is a reputable company.

In Gopeng on Sungai Kampar, 20 minutes' drive north of Ipoh, rafting trips and other outdoor adventures are offered at the MY Gopeng Resort (p126).

White-water rafting has become quite the craze in Sabah, with Kota Kinabalu-based operators taking travellers south of the city to the Beaufort Division for some Grade 3–4 rapids on the Sungai Padas (Padas River). Calmer water at Sungai Kiulu near Mt Kinabalu is a tamer option for beginners.

Kayaking is offered by both **Kuching Kayak** (☎082-253 005; www.kuchingkayak.com; 269 Jln Padungan) and **Borneo Trek & Kayak Adventure** (www.rainforestkayaking.com) in Kuching.

BIRD-WATCHING

Malaysia's tropical jungles and islands are home to over 600 species of birds. The principal twitching destinations are:

- » Cape Rachado Forest Reserve
- » Endau-Rompin National Park
- » Fraser's Hill (Bukit Fraser,
- » Bako National Park
- » Gunung Mulu National Park
- » Kenong Rimba State Park
- » Lambir Hills National Park
- » Mt Kinabalu
- » Royal Belum State Park
- » Taman Negara

Boating

The following yachting clubs offer chances for those interested in a sailing trip around the region or learning how to sail:

Royal Langkawi Yacht Club (☎04-966 4078; www.langkawiyahtclub.com), Kuala

Royal Selangor Yacht Club (☎03-3168 6964; www.rsyc.com.my), Pelabuhan Klang
Avillion Admiral Cove (p113), Port Dickson.

Boating adventures can also be had on the region's lakes, rivers and mangrove-lined estuaries. Taking a sundown boat ride through the mangroves of Kuching Wetlands National Park to spot crocodiles and fireflies can be a magical experience. Firefly-spotting boat trips out of Kuala Selangor are also popular.

On larger rivers, transport is by 'flying coffin' – long, narrow passenger boats with about 70 seats, not including the people sitting on the roof. Thanks to their powerful engines, these craft can power upriver against very strong currents.

Surfing

Wannabe Layne Beachleys and Kelly Slaters should haul their boards to Cherating and Juara on Pulau Tioman, Malaysia's surfing hot spots. **Surfing in Malaysia** (<http://surfingmalaysia.blogspot.com.au>) is a useful blog with links to other sources of information for boarders.



Eat Like a Local

When to Go

As might be expected of a people consumed with food and its pleasures, Singaporeans, Malaysians and Bruneians mark every special occasion with celebratory edibles.

Chinese New Year (January/February)

In the weeks leading up to Chinese New Year, every table is graced with *yue sang* (yee sang or *yu sheng* – ‘fresh fish’), a mound of grated raw vegetables, pickles, pomelo pieces and crispy, fried-dough pieces topped with sliced raw fish.

Ramadan (June/August)

During Ramadan special food markets swing into action in the late afternoons, offering a wide variety of Malay treats.

Deepavali (October/November)

During the Indian Festival of Lights, make your way to a Little India, where you'll find special sweets such as *jalebi* (deep-fried fritters soaked in sugar syrup) and savoury snacks like *muruku* (crispy fried coils of curry leaf-studded dough).

Eating like a local in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei is a snap. The food is absolutely delicious and hygiene standards are among the highest in the region. Not only is it easy to make sense of restaurant menus and signs here, but most vendors also speak at least some English. And an almost perverse obsession with food among the locals means that visitors are often smothered in culinary companionship; the traveller who makes the effort to partake in the region's edible delights will undoubtedly make a few *makan kaki* (food friends) along the way. Simply put, in this part of the world it's not ‘How are you?’ but ‘*Sudah makan?*’ (Have you eaten yet?).

Top Restaurants

- » **Rebung** (p83, Kuala Lumpur) – The next best thing to Malay home cooking is the expansive buffet of Malay specialties at this rustically charming restaurant.
- » **Xin Quan Fang** (p123, Ipoh) – A legendary hole-in-the-wall serving amazingly rich curry *mee*, a combination of rice and wheat noodles in a spicy, rich broth with chicken, pork and shrimp.
- » **Teksén** (p167, George Town) – Shophouse-bound restaurant that does excellent Chinese and Chinese/Malay fare.
- » **Muda Coffee Shop** (p203, Alor Setar) – Yes, we're recommending that you eat steamed fish head. Yes, we think you'll love it.
- » **Pak Putra Restaurant** (p220, Melaka) – Fabulous Pakistani cuisine including tandoori dishes, seafood and mutton rogan josh.

FASTING & FEASTING

Don't be deterred from visiting Malaysia during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of sunrise-to-sunset fasting. Indian and Chinese eateries remain open during the day to cater to the country's sizeable non-Muslim population and, come late afternoon, Ramadan bazaars pop up all over the country. These prepared-food markets offer a rare chance to sample Malay specialities from all over the country, some of which are specific to the festive season or rarely found outside private homes. One of the country's biggest Ramadan markets is held in KL's Malay enclave of Kampung Baru. Cruise the stalls and pick up provisions – but don't snack in public until the cry of the muezzin tells believers it's time to *buka puasa* (break the fast).

- » **Roost Juice & Bar** (p231, Johor Bahru) – Hainese noodles, mutton chops and Nonya-style fish are on the menu at JB's most chilled eatery.
- » **Ana Ikan Bakar Petai** (p256, Kuantan) – Freshly caught fish, crab and shrimp is priced by weight and cooked to your specifications.
- » **Bubu Resort** (p289, Perhentian Kecil) – Serving the best seafood BBQ on Peninsula Malaysia's east coast.
- » **The Dyak** (p392, Kuching) – Book ahead for this elegant restaurant, the first to treat Dayak home cooking as true cuisine.
- » **Moon Bell** (p314, Kota Kinabalu) – Spicy Xinjiang cuisine from China's northwest frontier.
- » **Iggy's** (p526, Singapore) – Top-end Japanese-European gastro fusion in a decadent setting.
- » **Pondok Sari Wangi** (p462, Bandar Seri Begawan) – A beloved BSB institution serving Indonesian/Chinese dishes.

Cheap Eats

- » **Madras Lane** (p72, Kuala Lumpur) – Hidden behind the wet market, these stalls serve noodles and *yong tau fu* (tofu stuffed with fish paste) in a fish broth.
- » **Haji Shariff's Cendol** (p111, Seremban) – Sample the classic Malay dessert plus its own take on *rojak* (a type of fruit salad).
- » **Kedai Kopi Prima** (p145, Taiping) – Busy, buzzy open-air hawker joint where you'll be hard-pressed to spend more than RM10.
- » **Lorong Baru (New Lane) Hawker Stalls** (p170, George Town) – Everything that's tasty and cheap about Penang, all in one narrow lane.
- » **Capitol Satay** (p221, Melaka) – Try *satay celup*, a Melaka adaptation of satay steamboat.
- » **Medan Selera Meldrum Walk** (p232, Johor Bahru) – Alleyway stalls frying up *ikan bakar*, the local curry laksa and other such delights.

- » **Akob Patin House** (p256, Kuantan) – Riverside operation serving the town's speciality *ikan patin* (silver catfish).
- » **Night Market** (p278, Kota Bharu) – Specialties include *ayam percik* (marinated chicken on bamboo skewers) and *nasi kerabu* (rice with coconut, fish and spices).
- » **Open-Air Market** (p393, Kuching) – The best spot for Sarawak laksa, the local version of the national classic.
- » **Night Market** (p306, Kota Kinabalu) – Best, cheapest and most interesting spot in KK for dinner.
- » **Chomp Chomp Food Centre** (p522, Singapore) – Arguably Singapore's best hawker centre, this option in Serangoon Gardens has a chilled vibe.
- » **Noralizah & Iskandar House of Curry** (p463, Bandar Seri Begawan) – Dip a selection of Indian flatbreads into a variety of delicious curries.

Cooking Courses

- A standard one-day course usually features a shopping trip to a local market to choose ingredients, followed by preparation of curry pastes, soups, curries, salads and desserts.
- » **Rohani Jelani** (p59, Kuala Lumpur)
 - » **Nazlina's Spice Kitchen** (p159, George Town)
 - » **Roselan's Malay Cookery Workshop** (p273, Kota Bharu)
 - » **Nancy's Kitchen** (p215, Melaka)
 - » **Bumbu Cooking School** (p389, Kuching)
 - » **Equator Adventure Tours** (p312, Kota Kinabalu)
 - » **Cookery Magic** (p513, Singapore)

Culinary Highlights

- Don't leave the region without trying:
- » **Ambuyat** Think of Brunei's sago mash as a blank palette upon which to paint the vibrant flavours of accompanying dishes.



- » (above) Hawker stall in George Town (p170)
- » (left) Chicken curry with roti canai (flaky, flat bread)

» **Cendol** Shaved ice, fresh coconut milk, pandan 'pasta' and sweet, smoky palm sugar beat the heat deliciously.

» **Roti canai** Flaky, crispy, griddled bread dipped in curry and dhal served with a mug of frothy *teh tarik* ('pulled' tea) is one of the world's best breakfasts.

» **Char kway teow** Silky rice noodles, plump prawns, briny cockles, chewy Chinese sausage, crispy sprouts, fluffy egg, a hint of chilli – all kissed by the smoke of a red-hot wok. Need we say more?

» **Hainanese chicken-rice** Tender poached chicken accompanied by rice scented with stock and garlic and a trio of dipping sauces, plain and spicy.

Intrepid Eating

Adventurous diners should seek out these specialties:

» **Perut ikan** This Penang Nonya coconut-milk curry, made with fish innards, pineapple and fresh

herbs, is spicy, sweet, sour and – yes – a little fishy.

» **Siat** When stir-fried, plump sago grubs turn golden and crispy and boast a savoury fattiness reminiscent of pork crackling.

» **Bak kut teh** Order this comforting stewed pork dish 'with everything' and be converted to porcine bits and bobs.

» **Sup torpedo** Malay bull's penis soup – like many 'challenging foods' – is said to enhance sexual drive.

» **Kerabu beromak** On Langkawi, coconut milk, chillies and lime juice dress this 'salad' of rubbery but appealingly briny sea-cucumber slices.

Where To Eat

Many locals would argue that the best (and best-value) food is found at hawker stalls, and who are we to argue? Most of these dishes can't be found in restaurants and

BRAIN FOOD AUSTIN BUSH

'Today fish head bigger,' said the waiter, as he slapped down the aluminium tray that contained an immense steaming fish head. He was aware of the discrepancy because on the previous night I'd eaten this very dish at this very restaurant.

When doing research for Lonely Planet guides I don't generally get the chance to eat at the same restaurant twice – there are simply too many places to investigate. And steamed fish head is an unlikely candidate to draw anyone, even someone as food-obsessed as me, back to the same restaurant on two consecutive nights. But the dish was easily one of the most delicious things I ate on my trip to Malaysia.

This encounter took place in Alor Setar, the capital and main city of tiny Kedah state, in northwestern Malaysia. It's a sleepy, predominately ethnic Malay place, and in contrast to just about everywhere I'd been previously in the country, it didn't appear to have many restaurants or food stalls. So in an effort to find something interesting I did some web research, which led me to a blog post and, ultimately, the fish head at Muda.

Muda has no sign, is distinctly aesthetically challenged, and is run by elderly Chinese Malaysians who can't be described as friendly or proficient in English. It also doesn't open until 8pm, but on the two nights I ate there customers would arrive from 7:45pm, place their orders and wait impatiently as the dining room gradually filled with oily smoke. Most of the cooking is done by one old man, so this can mean a long wait: on both visits I arrived at 8pm and ended up spending the next hour playing with my iPhone and nursing bottles of Malaysian Guinness until I was served.

But it was worth it.

Fish head may not seem like an especially meaty item, but the dish as served at Muda is really one of the meatiest, most *umami*-packed (savoury) dishes I've ever encountered. The fish head itself is actually more like a fish half and contains quite a bit of tender seabass flesh, both in the head and the body. This meatiness is boosted by a broth that includes soy sauce, tomatoes and mushrooms, countered by the tartness of salted plum, crunchy chunks of pickled vegetables and slivers of young ginger. With all this going on, the final garnish of thinly sliced leeks and deep-fried crispy garlic almost seems like a last-ditch, overzealous effort to include every ingredient in the kitchen.

Be the fish head big or small, I'm glad I ate at Muda twice, as it took the first visit for me to realise that steamed fish head served in a grotty restaurant with grumpy service is obviously not an ideal recommendation. And it took the second visit to realise that I didn't care – it's simply too good not to go in the book.

when they are, they're rarely as tasty, so hawker-stall dining is a must if you really want to appreciate the region's cuisines in all their glory. To partake, simply head to a stand-alone streetside kitchen-on-wheels, a coffee shop or a food court; place your order with one or a number of different vendors; find a seat (shared tables are common); and pay for each dish as it's delivered. After you're seated you'll be approached by someone taking orders for drinks, which are also paid for separately. Hawker food in Malaysia and Brunei is perfectly safe to eat, but the squeamish may want to start slowly, in one of Singapore's sanitised hawker centres.

Kopitiam generally refers to old-style, single-owner Chinese coffee shops. These simple, fan-cooled establishments serve noodle and rice dishes, strong coffee and other drinks, and all-day breakfast fare like soft-boiled eggs and toast to eat with *kaya* (coconut jam).

Restoran (restaurant) applies to eateries ranging from casual, decades-old Chinese establishments to upscale establishments boasting international fare, slick decor and a full bar. Between the two extremes lie Chinese seafood restaurants where the main course can be chosen live from a tank, as well as the numerous cafes found in Malaysia's many shopping malls.

Consider grazing at one or more *pasar* (markets). Morning markets usually have Chinese-owned stalls selling coffee and Indian-operated *teh tarik* stalls offering freshly griddled roti. Triangular *bungkus* (packages) piled in the middle of tables contain *nasi lemak* (rice boiled in coconut milk served with *ikan bilis* – small, dried sardines or anchovies – peanuts and a curry dish); help yourself and pay for what you eat. *Pasar malam* (night markets) are also good hunting grounds, where you'll find everything from laksa to fresh-fried sweet yeast donuts.

When to Eat

To those of us used to 'three square meals', it might seem as if the locals are always eating. In fact, five or six meals or snacks is more the order of the day than strict adherence to the breakfast-lunch-dinner trilogy. Breakfast is usually grabbed on the run: *nasi lemak* wrapped to go (*bungkus*) in a banana leaf or brown waxed paper, a quick bowl of noodles, toast and eggs, or griddled Indian bread.

Come late morning a snack might be in order, perhaps a *karipap* (deep-fried pastry filled with spiced meat or fish and potatoes).

DINING DOS & DON'TS

If eating with your hands, do:

- » wash your hands first; in Malay restaurants use water from the 'tea-pot' on the table while holding your fingers over the tray
 - » use only your right hand, and scoop food up with your fingers
 - » serve yourself from the communal plate with utensils, never your fingers
- Don't:
- » offer alcohol or pork to Muslims (and don't mention pork to Muslims)
 - » stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice; it symbolises death to Chinese

Lunch generally starts from 12.30pm, something to keep in mind if you plan to eat at a popular establishment.

The British left behind a strong attachment to afternoon tea, consumed here in the form of tea or coffee and a sweet or savoury snack like *tong sui* (sweet soups), various Indian fritters, battered and fried slices of cassava, sweet potato, banana and, of course, local-style sweets, *kuih*.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Given the inclusion of shrimp paste and other seafood products in many dishes, vegetarians and vegans may find it difficult to negotiate their way around many menus. Chinese vegetarian restaurants and hawker stalls are a safe bet (signage will include the words '*sayur sayuran*'); they're especially busy on the 1st and 15th of the lunar month, when many Buddhists adopt a vegetarian diet for 24 hours. Look also for Chinese stalls and eateries displaying rows of stainless-steel pans and advertising 'economy rice'; this type of restaurant will have several pure vegetarian dishes. South Indian restaurants are another haven, for snacks like *idli* (savoury, soft, fermented rice-and-lentil cakes) to eat with dhal, *dosa* (crispy pancakes sometimes filled with potato curry) and *thali* (full meals consisting of rice or bread with numerous small servings of curries and vegetables). Some offer vegetarian banana leaf rice meals and economy rice-like displays of varied 'meat' and 'fish' dishes made with gluten and soy.

regions at a glance



Kuala Lumpur

Shopping ✓✓
Food ✓✓✓
Art Galleries ✓✓✓

Super Shopping

Kuala Lumpur (KL) sports a multiplicity of malls, classic Southeast Asian fresh-produce markets and atmospheric night markets; the most famous is along Chinatown's Jln Petaling. Don't miss souvenir treasure house Central Market, based in a lovely art-deco building.

Fantastic Food

Allow your stomach to lead the way around KL. Tuck in with locals at the fantastic hawker stalls along Jln Alor, Imbi Market or Madras Lane. Sample Indian food in Brickfields and Little India, and a brilliant array of international options in Bangsar Baru and along the party strip Changkat Bukit Bintang.

Contemporary Art

Access Malaysia's vibrant contemporary art scene at the National Visual Art Gallery or at exhibitions held in smaller commercial galleries such as MAP and Valentine Willie Fine Arts.



Selangor & Negeri Sembilan

Wildlife ✓✓
Food ✓✓
Architecture ✓✓✓

Wildlife Encounters

Orang-utans and tigers are at Zoo Negara and monkeys scamper around the Batu Caves. Spot birds at Fraser's Hill, Cape Rachado Forest Reserve near Port Dickson, and the coastal mangroves near Kuala Selangor, where there's also the firefly flicker-fest.

Eating Adventures

Klang's Little India is the place for pork stew *bak kut teh*. Seremban also has delights ranging from the dessert *cendol* to handmade beef-ball noodles.

Architectural Wonders

Putrajaya is stacked with contemporary architecture around an artificial lake. The Istana Lama is a black hardwood palace in Sri Menanti.



Perak

Nature ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓✓
Architecture ✓✓✓

Jungles & Mangroves

Perak is home to the jungles of Royal Belum State Park and the forests of Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve. Gopeng, outside of Ipoh, also has a burgeoning adventure-travel scene.

Culinary Destination

Ipoh, Perak's largest city, is home to top regional Chinese cuisine, and some great Malay food. Ipoh is also allegedly where Malaysia's ubiquitous 'white coffee' was created.

Colonial Architecture

Ipoh and the surrounding Kinta Valley are virtual time warps into colonial-era Malaysia. Tai-ping also has its share of historical buildings, while Kuala Kangsar is a royal Disneyland of mosques and palaces.



Penang

Architecture ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓✓
Museums ✓✓✓

World Heritage

There's a reason George Town was declared a Unesco World Heritage site: the city is home to countless protection-worthy antique shophouses, mansions, Chinese clan houses, markets and temples.

Food & Drink

George Town is home to quality hawker centres; street vendors selling Chinese, Indian and Malay dishes; and an increasingly sophisticated contemporary eating and drinking scene.

Museums & Galleries

The streets of George Town are already something of an open-air museum, but the city also features excellent state-run and private institutions and contemporary art galleries, ensuring you'll be entertained for days.

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Langkawi, Kedah & Perlis

Beaches ✓✓✓
Nature ✓✓✓
Eating ✓

Splendid Beaches

Pulau Langkawi's beaches are world famous for a reason: the sand is white and fine, the water is clear and there has been relatively less development than in other Southeast Asian destinations.

Mountainous Jungle

The ancient jungle on Pulau Langkawi can be explored from above, via the Panorama Langkawi cable car, or seen up close at one of the island's numerous waterfalls or on a guided jungle trek.

International Eating

Pulau Langkawi is home to many foreign restaurants, from Thai to Turkish. And the island is duty-free so the bar scene won't do as much damage to your wallet.

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Melaka

Heritage ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓✓
Shopping ✓✓

Walkable Heritage

Learn about history, culture and architecture at many museums. Or just experience it wandering past Chinese shophouses, Dutch colonial architecture, Chinese and Hindu temples, mosques and churches.

Sit-down Meals

Take a dim-sum breakfast, eat banana-leaf curry for lunch and dine on Nonya specialities for dinner. Melaka isn't swarming with hawker stalls like KL and Penang but it offers a fine choice of eateries.

Shopping Options

Shop Chinatown's hippy-ish clothing, beaded Nonya shoes, and trinkets. Or go modern in air-con malls for electronics. Don't miss Jonker's Walk Night Market.

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Johor

Trekking ✓✓
Diving ✓
Nightlife ✓

Malaysia's Wilds

Endau-Rompin National Park isn't as well known as Taman Negara in Pahang, but that's what makes it so magical. Trek through myriad green jungles and along clear rivers to several impressive waterfalls, or go deeper in hope of spotting one of the park's elephant herds.

Under-the-radar Islands

The Seribuat Archipelago is where all the in-the-know expats living in Singapore and southern Malaysia go. Here you'll find low-key beaches, spectacular diving and family-friendly lodgings.

Duty-free Booze

The Zon is Johor Bahru's duty-free port. Hop from one bar/nightclub to the next without spending all your ringgit.

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Pahang & Tioman Island

Beaches ✓✓✓
Jungles ✓✓✓
Food ✓✓

Beach Life

Coastal Pahang offers the supremely chilled-out surf town of Cherating. Pulau Tioman's Juara Beach is paradise.

Jungle Adventures

The vast primeval jungle preserve of Taman Negara offers myriad trekking and wildlife-spotting opportunities. Pulau Tioman's many trails will make you glad you packed hiking boots along with your sandals.

Culinary Travel

Kuantan is a food-lover's city, from the cheap and delicious food stalls next to the bus station to the hard-to-find but oh-so-worth-it seafood paradise of Ana Ikan Bakar Petai restaurant. Perhaps you'll even make a pilgrimage to taste Raub's famous fish-head curry.

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East Coast Islands, Kelantan & Terengganu

Beaches & Islands ✓✓✓
Jungles ✓✓
Culture ✓✓

Aquatic Adventures

Home to some of Southeast Asia's loveliest and most accessible islands, including the Perhentians, east-coast Malaysia is a magnet for those looking to dive, snorkel and swim.

Off the Beaten Track

Gunung Stong State Park offers mountain treks, swimming and caving, and a breathtakingly steep waterfall. Though accessible by train, your fellow travellers will be few here in Kelantan's wild interior.

Cultural Insights

Kelantan is amazingly rich in opportunities for cultural exploration. Further south, Terengganu offers visitors the chance to explore Malay culture – both modern and classical.

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Sabah

Wildlife ✓✓✓
Trekking ✓✓✓
Diving ✓✓✓

Land & Underwater Wildlife

From the iconic orang-utan to pygmy elephants, Sabah is home to some of the world's rarest animal species. Land animals are tough to spot in the thick jungle, but it's easy to find all manner of marine life underwater.

Hiking & Trekking

The mountains and hills of Sabah are a trekker's paradise, taking travellers past raging rivers that flow out of and through some of the most primordial forests in the world. Remember: it gets hot here.

Diving & Snorkelling

Sabah is well known for its scuba scene. The diving in Layang Layang and the famous Sipidan is some of the best in the world.

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Sarawak

Hiking & Trekking ✓✓✓
Caves ✓✓✓
Wildlife ✓✓

Hiking & Trekking

Trekking from Bario to Ba Kelalan or to the summit of Gunung Mulu will thrill hikers, but even a stroll through one of Kuching-area's national parks will envelope you in equatorial rain-forest.

Cave Exploration

The Wind Cave, Fairy Cave and Niah National Park boast caverns with stalactites and bats, but for size and spectacle you can't beat Gunung Mulu National Park, famed for the Deer Cave and the 700m-long Sarawak Chamber.

Jungle Wildlife

See wild proboscis monkeys at Bako National Park, orang-utans at Semenggoh Nature Reserve and crocodiles in the waters of Kuching Wetlands National Park.

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Brunei

Food ✓✓✓
Architecture ✓
Nature ✓✓✓

Food Mad

Brunei's Muslim population frowns on alcohol as decadent, but the nation has no problem indulging in a little gastronomic debauchery. The sultanate is food mad, and the opening of a restaurant is usually a major social event.

Grand Architecture

Between the Sultan's palace, the opulent Empire Hotel, mosques and the largest water village in the world, this nation compensates for its small size with some huge construction projects.

Primary Jungle

The sultanate has done a fine job of preserving its tracts of primary jungle. They're protected within a tightly controlled national park, providing breathing space for Borneo's beasts.

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Singapore

Food ✓✓✓
Shopping ✓✓✓
Museums ✓✓✓

Food

Food in Singapore is both a passion and a unifier across ethnic divides, with Chinese, Indian, Indonesian and Nonya (a fusion of Chinese and Malay) specialties. Find legendary hawker centres and food courts, as well as experimental, fine-dining hotspots.

Shopping

All bases are covered, from lavish malls and boutiques, to heirloom handicraft studios, beautiful antiques stores and local galleries peddling contemporary local art.

Museums

While giants like the National Museum of Singapore and the Asian Civilisations Museum are a must, make time for lesser-known NUS Museums and the haunting Changi Museum & Chapel.

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